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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the frequency and intensity of stress among 135 teachers of educable mentally retarded (EMR), learning disabled (LD), and emotionally disturbed (ED) children and the relationship of stress levels to certain demographic variables including years of experience, grade level, educational background, category of student, age, and sex. In addition, differences among teachers with regard to factors which contribute to stress and factors which help teachers guard against stress were examined. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Special Teacher Response to Stressors (STPESS) were used to elicit responses from the teachers by mail. The results indicated: (1) male teachers were more depersonalized by their jobs than female teachers; (2) teachers with 4 to 5 years experience (compared to teachers with less experience) and teachers with only a bachelor's degree (compared to those with master's and specialist's degrees) perceived themselves to care frequently and intensely about the needs of their students; and (3) teachers between 26 and 30 years of age perceived themselves to be more depersonalized by their experiences than older teachers. LD and ED teachers cited legal concerns, lack of administrative and peer support, and lack of support services as extremely stressful. ED teachers in particular were fearful of being attacked verbally and physically, and rated their overall job responsibilities as significantly stressful. LD and ED teachers felt that exercise and outdoor programs and confiding in significant others (i.e., wife or husband) were helpful in combatting stress. EMR teachers felt peer support was helpful. (Author)

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*Special Education Teacher Burnout: A Three Part Investigation

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Running Head: Teacher Burnout

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Abstract

In order to assist teachers of EMR, LD, and ED students in pinpointing debilitating and stressful job-related factors and in implementing certain intervention and change strategies designed to manage stress, this study investigated the frequency and intensity of stress among these teachers, and its relationship to certain demographic variables including years of experience, grade level, educational background, category of student, age, and sex.

In addition, differences among teachers with regard to factors which contribute to stress and factors which help teachers guard against stress were determined. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) and the Special Teacher Response to Stressors (STRESS) were used to elicit responses from the 135 EMR, LD, and ED teachers that participated in this study. The results indicate that (a) male teachers were more depersonalized by their jobs than female teachers; (b) teachers with 4-5 years experience, compared to teachers with less experience, and teachers with only a bachelor's degree, compared to those with master's and specialist's degrees perceived themselves to care frequently and intensely about the needs of their students; and (c) teachers between 26-30 years old perceived themselves to be more depersonalized by their experiences than older teachers. LD and ED teachers cited legal concerns, lack of administrative and peer support, and lack of support services as extremely stressful. ED teachers in particular were fearful of being attacked verbally and physically, and rated their overall job responsibilities as significantly stressful. LD and ED teachers felt that exercise and outdoor programs and confiding in significant others (i.e., wife or husband) were helpful in combatting stress. EMR teachers felt peer support was helpful.

Special Education Teacher Burnout:

A Three Part Investigation

Although mainstreaming has been received well by its advocates, a number of problems have confronted educators who are implementing this federal mandate. Some of these problems include: (a) poor acceptance of handicapped children by their nonhandicapped peers (Bryan, 1974); (b) lack of skill and experience in teaching and working with the handicapped (Horne, 1979; Johnson & Cartwright, 1979); (c) negative attitudes toward mainstreaming and the handicapped (Alexander & Strain, 1979; Mandell & Strain, 1978); (d) emotional and physical stress caused and/or compounded by the requirements of Public Law 94-142 (Bensky, Shaw, Gouse, Gates, Dixon, & Beane, 1980; Weiskopf, 1980). Research has shown that problems associated with peer acceptance, lack of skill in teaching the handicapped and negative attitudes toward them are solved largely through various preservice and inservice training programs (Johnson, 1980). However, the problem of stress experienced by special educators as a result of the requirements of Public Law 94-142 is an area where very little research and program intervention has been undertaken.

The extent to which the demands made on the teacher are stressful depend on: (a) the degree to which the teaching demands are new or unfamiliar; (b) the degree to which the teacher's ability to meet the demands is impaired by poor working conditions; and (c) the degree to which the teacher is already experiencing stress resulting from sources outside his or his teaching requirements (Kyriacou & Suttcliffe, 1977). It appears that the types of conditions confronting special

education teachers are similar. It has been suggested that teachers of the severely and profoundly handicapped (i.e., autistic children) suffer frequent stress as a result of their professional responsibilities (Foster, 1980). However, teachers of learning disabled (LD), educable mentally retarded (EMR), and the emotionally disturbed (ED)--often referred to as to the mildly handicapped--are dealing with significantly modified role descriptions since the enactment of Public Law 94-142. They are more heavily involved in educational assessment and diagnosis, placement team meetings, writing and monitoring individualized education programs (IEP), consulting, handling due process paperwork, and mainstreaming. As a result of these increased demands, teachers of the mildly handicapped are expected to be under more stress than teachers of the severely and profoundly handicapped (Bensky, et. al., 1980).

Despite the possible existence of debilitating emotional and physical stress among teachers of the mildly handicapped (Weiskopf, 1980), there has been a surprising lack of research related directly to how such stress might lead to subsequent burnout, defined as "a syndrome of emotional (and physical) exhaustion that frequently occurs among human services professionals (i.e., child care workers, social workers, teachers) characterized by negative cynical attitudes toward clients (or students), feelings of unhappiness regarding accomplishments on the job, and absenteeism" (Maslach & Jackson, Note 1, pg. 2). Indirectly, some researchers have reported the personal and environmental characteristics which can cause stress among teachers of the mildly handicapped. For example, in an investigation designed to follow-up beginning LD teachers, Morsink, Blackhurst, and Williams

(1979) found that most beginning teachers encounter problems because competencies are not developed adequately during preservice training. The researchers reported that these first year teachers' most significant problems (those which might cause stress) were: (a) lack of instructional materials; (b) getting regular teachers to understand the needs of handicapped children; (c) developing sequential, individualized programs for each student; (d) lack of time for planning and preparation; (e) misplacement of children in special education classes. Similar problems might confront teachers of the EMR (Williams, 1976) and, perhaps more often, teachers of the ED (Bullock & Whelan, 1971). Less restrictive results have been reported by Bensky et. al. (1980) who demonstrated that resource room teachers were under greater stress than regular classroom teachers and teachers in self-contained special classes. For resource room teachers, the greatest stressors were: (a) diagnosis and assessment; (b) pupil load; (c) teaching (preparation and implemention); (d) evaluation by supervisors; (e) job related work after hours; and (f) unclear role descriptions.

The research reported above offers direction for future investigations. For example, investigators have identified somewhat those factors which contribute to stress among special education teachers in general. Current research, however, must determine the frequency and intensity of stress and how such stress might lead to subsequent burnout among teachers of the mildly handicapped. In addition, factors specific to the professional roles of these teachers which are perceived as stressful, and those factors which help guard against burnout must be identified. Given the critical need to assist teachers of the mildly handicapped in pinpointing debilitating and stressful job-

related factors and in implementing certain intervention and change strategies, this study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. What is the difference among teachers with respect to certain demographic variables including years of experience, school level, educational background, age, and sex and frequency and intensity of burnout?
2. What are the differences in frequency and intensity of job-related stress experienced by teachers of the mildly handicapped?
3. What factors contribute to stress among teachers?
4. What factors help teachers manage stress and guard against subsequent burnout?

Procedure

Participants

The 195 participants in this investigation were a random sample of over 600 full-time teachers of LD, ED, and EMR students who worked in various schools and other educational agencies located in a 13 county region of Northwest Ohio. Of the 195 questionnaires mailed 135 were returned, which represents a return rate of 69%.

Method

The final four-section questionnaire (Johnson & Gold, Note 2) based on a preliminary survey designed to aid in the selection of items and questionnaire format for the final survey, consisted of 184 items.

The first section requested demographic information regarding years of experience, area of specialization, grade level, educational background, age, and sex. The format of this section consisted of multiple-choice responses.

The second section consisted of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, Note 1), designed to measure frequency and intensity of various aspects of the burnout syndrome. The MBI consists of 22 items in three separate subscales: Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization, and Personal Accomplishment. The Emotional Exhaustion subscale describes feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. The Depersonalization subscale describes an unfeeling and impersonal response towards recipients of one's care or service. For both the Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalization subscales, higher mean scores correspond to higher degrees of experienced burnout. The Personal Accomplishment subscale describes feelings of competence and successful achievements in one's work with people. In contrast to the other two subscales, lower mean scores on this subscale correspond to higher degrees of experienced burnout. The frequency scale of the MBI is a Likert-type format ranging from 1 ("a few times a year") to 5 ("every day"). Similarly, the intensity scale ranges from 1 ("very mild") to 5 ("very strong"). Split-half reliability coefficients for the MBI are .74 for frequency and .81 for intensity for the entire instrument, and range from .75 (frequency) to .89 (intensity) for the three subscales.

The third section consisted of a questionnaire designed to elicit information on teachers' perception of the degree certain factors in their professional roles are stressful. The fourth section asked teachers to identify certain activities they perceive as helpful in guarding against stress and subsequent burnout. Internal consistency was estimated for these sections by the coefficient alpha formula (Cronbach, 1951), which yielded reliability coefficients of .88 for

section three and .90 for section four. The items contained in these two sections were based on a review of the literature on teacher stress and an analysis of the professional roles and responsibilities of teachers of the mildly handicapped. In addition, these items were revised according to suggestions made by participants returning the preliminary survey.

Results

The computer program Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Nie, 1970) was used to analyze all data.

To answer the first research question, the t-test for independent means and analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine if any differences existed among teachers regarding frequency and intensity of burnout and certain demographic variables. The results of the analyses indicate a significant difference between male and female teachers regarding the frequency (t, 133df, = 2.39) and the intensity (t, 133df, = 2.92) of burnout on the Depersonalization subscale of the MBI. Male teachers perceived themselves as depersonalized more often and more intensely than females. Analyses of data to ascertain the differences among teachers on other demographic variables revealed the results contained in Table 1.

Table 1

Results of ANOVA on Frequency (F) and Intensity (I)
of Burnout on MBI Subscales and Certain Demographic Variables

Demographic Variables	DF	Emotional Exhaustion F	Emotional Exhaustion I	Depersonalization F	Depersonalization I	Personal Accomplishment F	Personal Accomplishment I
1. Years of Experience	4/128	.49	1.95	1.07	1.70	2.19	*3.49
2. School Level	3/116	.91	.80	.18	.26	1.03	.78
3. Educational Background	3/131	2.02	2.03	1.82	1.12	*7.42	*6.91
4. Age	5/129	1.70	1.79	1.04	*2.60	1.01	1.25

*$p < .05$

Specifically, on the Personal Accomplishment subscale of the MBI teachers with between 4-5 years of experience in special education demonstrated stronger feelings concerning, for example, professional accomplishments on the job than teachers who had less teaching experience ($F = 3.49$, $df = 4/128$, $p < .05$). Teachers with only a bachelor's degree revealed feelings of personal accomplishment working with the mildly handicapped more often ($F = 7.42$, $df = 3/131$, $p < .05$) and more strongly ($F = 6.91$, $df = 3./131$, $p < .05$) than teachers with master's or specialist's degree. Teachers who were between 26-30 years old perceived themselves as more depersonalized than teachers in the 41-50 age range ($F = 2.60$, $df = 5/129$, $p < .05$).

To answer the second research question, ANOVA was used to determine if there were any differences among EMR, LD, and ED teachers on the three subscales of the MBI with regard to frequency and intensity of

job related stress. Despite expectations to the contrary, this analysis revealed no significant F-ratios.

Means and standard deviations were computed and ANOVA was performed in order to identify those job-related factors which teachers perceived to be stressful, and to determine if any differences existed among teachers regarding the degree of stress for any factor. Table 2 outlines by category of teacher those factors respondents perceived as stressful. A group mean of at least 3.5 per item was used as the criterion by which significant job-related factorr were identified (Glass & Stanley, 1970).

Table 2

Factors Perceived by EMR, LD, and ED Teachers as Stressful

Item	EMR		LD		ED	
	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD
1. Threatened with a lawsuit			3.77	1.59	3.61	1.50
2. Student violence			3.61	1.38		
3. Lack of acceptance of handicapped students by general education teachers			3.71	1.13		
4. Lack of administrative support			3.57	1.42	3.84	1.46
5. Inappropriate supervisory service					3.79	1.38
6. Insufficient psychological service					3.76	1.22
7. Inappropriate psychological service					3.74	1.35
8. Dispute regarding student placement					3.79	.99
9. Coping with student apathy (homework, tardiness, inattentiveness)			3.73	1.05		
	N = 47		N = 49		N = 38	

Particular categories of teachers perceived certain items to be more stressful than did teachers of other types of handicapped students. More specifically, teachers of LD students perceived involuntary assignment to sponsor extracurricular groups more stressful than EMR and ED teachers ($F = 3.98$, $df = 3/131$, $p < .05$). In addition, teachers of ED students perceived as more stressful than did EMR and LD teachers insufficient ($F = 3.36$) and inappropriate ($F = 4.25$) supervisory service; insufficient psychological services ($F = 3.098$); fear of physical attacks ($F = 23.47$), verbal threats ($F = 10.40$), and other potential violence ($F = 12.48$) by students; and rated their overall teaching responsibilities as extremely stressful ($F = 9.17$). These F-ratios, with 3/131 degrees of freedom were significant at the .05 level of confidence.

To identify stress management techniques perceived as helpful by teachers and to determine if differences existed among teachers regarding stress management, means and standard deviations were computed and ANOVA was performed. Table 3 outlines by category of teachers those factors respondents felt were helpful. Once again, a group mean of 3.5 was used as a criterion by which significant stress managers were identified. The results indicated also that no particular category of teacher perceived certain items more helpful than did another category of teacher.

Table 3

Factors Perceived by EMR, LD, and ED Teachers as Helpful in Managing Stress

Item	EMR		LD		ED	
	X	SD	X	SD	X	SD
1. Exercise program			3.50	1.34		
2. Outdoor recreation					3.68	1.44
3. Confide in significant others, i.e., wife, husband, pastor, etc.			3.55	1.34	3.58	1.35
4. Setting realistic goals, i.e. expectations for students, administrators					3.55	1.61
5. Support self					3.60	1.46
6. Peer support	3.50	1.44			3.50	1.56
	N = 47		N = 49		N = 38	

Discussion

The results indicated that male teachers of mildly handicapped students perceived themselves to be, among other things, (a) blamed for thier students' learning problems, (b) uncaring about what happens to their students, and (c) callous toward people since becoming special educators. This result was consistent with conclusions drawn by Maslach and Jackson (Note 1), who demonstrated that male human services professionals, including teachers, scored higher on the Depersonalization subscale of the MBI than females. One explanation for this phenomenon is consistent with theory described by Getzels and Guba (1965). These authors contended that male teachers in general are expected to perform the role of "strong arm" disciplinarian, which might or might not be consistent with their perceived role as a teacher. Unfortunately,

many male teachers who exhibit caring and supportive behavior, are often overshadowed by expectations of peers. Consequently, behaviors described by Maslach and Jackson (Note 1) as depersonalizing often emerge. Such circumstances might reflect the predicament of the male teachers in this study.

Results of analyses on other demographic variables and frequency and intensity of burnout indicated that teachers with 4-5 years experience, compared to teachers with less experience, and teachers with only a bachelor's degree, compared to those with master's and specialist's degrees, perceived themselves to care frequently and intensely about the needs of their students. In addition, teachers between 26-30 years old perceived themselves to be more depersonalized by their professional experiences than older teachers. The results on years of experience and age are consistent with research conducted by Kyriacou and Suttcliffe (1978). These researchers demonstrated that young teachers with between 0-4 years experience acknowledged that factors related to establishing a relationship with students (i.e., procedures for punishment and student acceptance of teacher authority) were significantly stress provoking. Similar results specific to LD teachers have been demonstrated by Morsink, Blackhurst, and Williams (1979). Differences by level of education are inconsistent with the conclusions reported by Maslach and Jackson (Note 1), who found that post graduate human services professionals, compared to those with only a bachelor's degree, felt that they had accomplished many worthwhile things with their clients.

Surprisingly, no significant differences were found in frequency and intensity of burnout among EMR, LD, and ED teachers. No research

reports were found to confirm or deny this result. It has been suggested, however, that the roles and responsibilities of these teachers of mildly handicapped students are so closely alligned that little difference exists among them in terms of procedures for assessing, planning and implementing programs, and instructing students (Gajar, 1979). Consequently, it might be postulated that little difference exists among EMR, LD, and ED teachers in terms of frequency and intensity of instructionally linked factors which contribute to stress.

A number of factors were perceived by teachers, namely LD and ED teachers, as contributors to stress. These factors, however, were not reflective of these teachers' instructional relationships with students. Most were related to legal concerns, administrative and peer support, and support services (i.e., psychological services). As anticipated, ED teachers were more fearful than EMR and LD teachers of physical harm and verbal abuse by students, although most had never been attacked verbally or physically. In addition, LD and ED teachers cited more factors that help manage stress than EMR teachers, although no significant differences were noted among teachers as to the potential worth of any particular stress manager over another. One explanation for the differences between EMR teachers and LD and ED teachers in specifying factors which contribute to and help manage stress is that research has shown that EMR teachers, as a group, are satisfied with the responsibilities of their job (Wiggins, 1976). As a result, it might be hypothesized that EMR teachers are under less stress professionally than LD and ED teachers, although no results were found in this investigation to confirm this hypothesis.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Based on the results of this investigation a number of recommendations can be made which focus on helping teachers to combat stress, which allow administrators to anticipate stressful conditions and implement strategies designed to reduce stress, and which permit teacher educators to provide experiences during preservice training which aid in the reduction of stress and subsequent burnout during the professional years.

Teachers

1. Teachers new to the profession should seek training on time management techniques which focus on their professional goals and personal values. Such training might enable them to set realistic and systematic priorities for professional growth (Partin & Gargiulo, 1980).
2. Experienced teachers should seek new professional challenges by (a) periodically requesting changes in teaching assignments, (b) pursuing graduate work, (c) attending professional meetings and/or (d) assuming active leadership roles on working committees within their school system.
3. Teachers need to examine their values and determine what their behavior will be prior to the occurrences of critical situations and instances in which their professional ethics may be challenged (Frith, 1981). This may include, for example, seeking assertiveness training to enhance their role as a child advocate.
4. Teachers attempt to develop problem solving groups among themselves as one measure to fill the void created by insufficient and ineffective support services.

Administrators

1. Special educators with less than three years teaching experience should be provided with a mentor, an older, experienced teacher who meets regularly with the young teacher to provide direction for effective time management and attainment of professional goals. The experienced teacher may also provide needed supervisory service for new teachers or coordinate activities of working committees in the school system.
2. Supervision and consultation services for the inexperienced teacher should occur regularly and frequently. In this role, the supervisor should not assume to give advice without being willing to "roll up the shirt sleeves and work" to assist the inexperienced teacher.
3. Workshops and inservice training for entry level teachers should include concepts related to stress management techniques.
4. Administrative personnel should attempt to honor the special educator's request for change in assignment. It could be that the opportunity to work with younger, older, a different type of handicapped student, or with nonhandicapped children may renew the teacher.
5. Administrators should consider their professional roles and avoid asking the special educator to compromise on issues related to child advocacy.
6. Supervisors and psychologists should schedule regular consultation time with teachers. Further, consultation may be perceived by these teachers as ineffective if the supervisor or psychologist does not attempt to work directly with the teacher and students.

Teacher Educators

1. Include instructional components in preservice programs which address the need for stress reduction during professional years. These components might include instruction or time management techniques, development of communication skills, and an examination of implications of child advocacy roles within the curriculum.
2. Sponsor weekend seminars for recent graduates which focus on topics identified by participants through a needs assessment. The university may consider providing such seminars as a free service to students. Preservice teachers may also be invited to observe reactions of recent graduates to new professional responsibilities.

It has been pointed out in this investigation that teachers of the mildly handicapped, in particular LD and ED teachers, are under considerable stress. In certain instances the frequency and intensity of stress is linked with demographic characteristics including sex, age, educational background, and years of experience. In addition, factors related to legal concerns, administrative and peer support, support services, and fear of physical and verbal abuse are viewed as extremely stressful, resulting in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This investigation, although limited, has identified factors which help teachers manage stress; however, additional research should be undertaken in this area. As a consequence, stress management programs can be developed and implemented that are relevant to teachers.

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Reference Note

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2. Johnson, A., & Gold, V. Special Teacher Response to Environmental Stressors (STRESS). Unpublished manuscript, 1980.

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